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Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church
by Julia Bratu

I initially wasn’t sure where to visit for this field trip, because I work a lot on the weekends and I was unfamiliar with service times for most faith congregations. In hindsight, I probably could have just googled whatever times would convenience me in the Richmond area. Either way it led to me visiting the Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church at 10:30 AM on Sunday, October 25th. I had a friend suggested it to me since it happened to be one of the only times that worked well for me. At 420 N Boulevard, Richmond VA, the actual church has a quaint charm to it. Simple in design, the building is plain brick with a steeple. The detail that stood out the most was the red doors that lead inside. The head of the service Rev. David Niemeyer is a friendly man, who spent time greeting people at the beginning. Although the red doors are beautiful and face the street, there were some doors towards the back by the parking lot that I took instead. As I headed

I was greeted by the Rev. as I came in, being noticed as ‘the girl with the silver hair,’ as I so often am. We talked for a short moment, and overall he was very friendly and helpful. He gave me a short overview of the whole service and invited me to stay afterwards. After that, I headed to my seat. Most of the people attending were white and in their mid-twenties at the youngest. They were pretty evenly split between male and female, and every person inside was smiling warmly at each other. I felt comfortable around everyone, although too shy to talk to them of my own accord. I was sure that if I needed help, I would be able to ask those around me.

The inside of the church has a simple and elegant appearance. Just as the red doors on the outside make all of the difference, on the very back wall there was a beautiful stained glass window of Christ which made the simple white walls draw everything back to it. It was obvious that this piece was meant to be a point of interest, and it did catch my attention very effectively. Below and in front of the window was the area where the Rev. lead the service. An altar with a crucifix was placed behind the podium, and on either side were seats for the choir. Extending out towards me, were a series of pews on either side. There was also an organ towards the front that I almost missed for some reason, possibly from taking everything in. The high-arched ceilings made me feel small in my seat, but it was a good feeling.

As people poured in and the service began with the organ playing, I found myself fumbling an unsure of what to do at certain points. Most concerned with learning, I just sat and listened. The tone was incredibly uplifting, yet solemn. Everyone seemed relatively reserved, not in the sense that they didn’t get into it but in that they all sang and recited in unison. There was a beauty to it, that added to the ‘small’ feeling that I said the arched ceilings gave me. In my eyes, this is a good thing. The
service followed what I later found out to be called Holy Eucharist Rite II. They use Rite I on the first Sunday of every month, which I would have liked to see so I may go back at another date to find out what that is like. Rite II was originally used in earlier versions of Christianity. It celebrates the coming of Christ. Rite I celebrates the ascent to heaven after death and was used in western churches during the middle ages. From what I have read, a difference between both types of Rites is in ritual.

My memory may be foggy, because I spent a lot of time lost in everything that was going on. During the service, we began by singing a hymn alongside the choir (which sounded very nice) and then standing. After this a few prayers were said and another song – I really liked it so I looked it up. It is called Gloria in Excelsis Deo. The opening words of the hymnal were believed to be the words that the angels sung to Christ as he was born. After this, we sat and listened to the scriptures. The first was Isaiah about the Lord renewing his covenant with David’s descendants. Although I have a Christian background, I’ve pretty much never really identified with any religion so a lot of that went way over my head. The second reading was about nothing being able to separate the people from the love of god.

Despite my confusion, Rev. Niemeyer talked about the scriptures to us and helped to explain their significance. It was very uplifting, and he was good at relating their meanings to mundane life. After all of this, we stood to listen to a gospel reading. This one was one that I recognized fairly well as the one where Jesus fed the crowd with a small amount of fish and bread. For the sake of integrity and because it was really easy to find, I looked it up and found that the reading was from Matthew 14:13 -21. This was a solemn part of the service, because from my understanding the belief in the Episcopalian faith is that God speaks directly to his people during these readings (or at least that’s how it was explained to me).

After this, a creed was recited. I stood and listened, recognizing that it was a declaration of faith. Soon, we were left to greet each other. We shook hands and every person offered me a friendly smile. Once that was done, a prayer was sung for communion and the Lord’s Prayer was recited. The bread and wine were consecrated and once people began to leave their seats I remained and contemplated the significance of this action. It is not widely believed that the body and blood of Christ is actually present during the Eucharist in the Episcopalian church, but rather that the presence of Christ is there. I contemplated this, still unable to fully come to an understanding of it since they do consecrate the bread and wine.

After the Eucharist, a parting prayer was said and we were free to leave. I went out to my car and thought on the symbolism of the entire morning. What stood out to me the most in my mind was the stained glass window at the back with very other detail on the walls inside. It spoke to me and really showed that the presence of Christ really was the focal point of the service. It was meant for him to be focused on completely, with most other actions coming second.

Overall, it was a beautiful experience with a friendly congregation. The service was difficult for me to follow at first, but even just sitting and listening brought about a sense that there was something greater to be found in the
world. •

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